



Like surgeons,
skilled hands
work to restore
and conserve
paintings and
other pieces that
have problems.

Linda Owen, a paper conservator at the Intermuseum Conservation Association, works on one of two 18th century maps from Ferrara, Italy, that had been stuck together.

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By Dorothy Shinn
Beacon Journal art and architecture critic

They're scarred, gouged, chipped, bruised, worn down by time and a bit frayed around the edges, but they still make your heart skip a beat. They are, in their own way, the Olympians of their kind, the medalists, the perfect 10s of their day.

And that's what makes them worth saving.

So they're off to the area's best clinic, and no, it's not the Cleveland Clinic. It's the Intermuseum Conservation Association - a clinic, if you will, for art. It's where art is taken to be repaired, refreshed and restored to its original glory. Mark Spitz should be so lucky.

Take, for instance, an untitled farm scene in the Cuyahoga Valley by Akron-area artist William Sommer, painted in oil on board around 1925. It has a few cosmetic problems, and in its current state, it can't be shown.

Or the E. Sanchez Perrier oil on board landscape that has several scratches and nicks around its edges, one of them considerable.

Or a dark landscape by William Keith that's made even darker than the artist intended by aging varnish.

Or the Albert Bierstadt that appears to have been varnished after it was hung, and sloppily at that.

The Akron Art Museum has six works currently waiting to be restored at the ICA, and while the museum is closed for the next two years, it has also stored many of its treasures there.

Come the reopening, the permanent collection will go on view, and Kathryn A. Wat, AAM associate curator of exhibitions, wants every work to look its absolute best.

Museum registrar Arnold Tunstall is doing everything that he can to make sure that happens. He has been back and forth between Akron and the ICA almost every week since the AAM shut its doors in March, and he'll probably continue to do so until the muse-

Art on the mend

um reopens.

"As we were packing the collection, we came across pieces that had problems," Tunstall said.

It wasn't a surprise. The problems have been known for years, but nothing was done because there was no money to fix them.

And that was frustrating.

"Every now and then, Katy would pull a piece out of the vault that she wanted, and she couldn't use it because of its condition," he said.

For certain shows, such as the recent AAM-organized exhibit *In a Romantic Mood*, Wat could get one or two pieces worked on at the ICA, he said. But there were others languishing in the museum's vaults, waiting for their own special day.

That day will come in 2006 when the permanent collection will finally have its own galleries.

In anticipation of that, Wat and Tunstall began compiling a list in hopes of winning a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for the reinstallation of the AAM collec-

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Above, Jack Flotte, associate conservator of objects, works on a privately owned pre-Columbian figure. At left, Wendy Partridge uses a small saw to cut an epoxy cast of picture frame leafing as part of a restoration for the Allen County, Ohio, museum.

Beacon Journal photographs by Paul Tople

Mend

A lot of Akron Museum art is in for treatment

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tion.

"As we were wrapping the works for storage, anything that had even a remote question about us being able to show it in the future or needing a cleaning was marked down on a list, and we also made up a sheet on each of them," Tunstall said.

A few weeks ago, he began to examine the objects more closely. "It's sort of paradoxical," he said. "Some of them that seemed to be OK are going to be problematical, as it turns out. And others that look terrible, well, they can be easily fixed. A few that the staff here at the ICA have already worked on look completely revived.

"So we had them give us a proposal of what they can do, how much it would cost, which ones were at risk, which ones had only cosmetic problems, which ones needed to be taken care of immediately or they couldn't be saved."

Then he met with AAM director Mitchell Kahan and chief curator Barbara Tannenbaum to choose six crucial works that needed to be ready for the re-opening.

Those six paintings, some in frames, some not, were laid out last week on a large white table at the ICA, cushioned by what appeared to be lengths of carpet padding.

"Some of the NEA grant for the reinstallation of the collection will obviously include pedestals, labels, signage and minor conservation - everything you would need to get things ready to go," Wat said.

The permanent collection from 1850 to 1950 will be housed on the first floor of the old building, while works from 1950 to the present will be in the new building. There will be flexibility for focus exhibitions, Wat said.

One of her favorites is the E. Sanchez Perrier painting. The work, circa 1870, by an artist from Spain, was in a drawer.

When you see the painting at a distance, or perhaps upside down, your first reaction is that it's a photograph. But seen close up, it becomes obvious that the work is merely photographically precise.

The artist has captured not only the high, harsh light of central Spain, the precise movement and gesture of the youths loading their fishing boat, but the movement of the willows along the riverbank.

"Each time I see it, I get goosebumps," Wat said. "This was one of those where Arnie rang my office and said 'Come down and look at this now.'"

"I had forgotten how beautiful it is," Tunstall said.

To fix this work, ICA conservator Per Knutas said they would "fill in the scratches because they're shallow. And then we would repaint them to match the surrounding paint. The same with the (Jules) Dupre."

"We wouldn't show works in this condition," Wat said. "We're lucky that (the damage) isn't in a focal point in the painting, but it's still serious enough that it has to be addressed."

In the case of the Sommer, what the conservators have to contend with is some ill-advised repairs done in the past. It's first in line for restoration, since it is scheduled for the first exhibition.

"A lot of Sommer's paintings have been varnished after the fact," Tunstall said. "He worked with different kinds of mediums to give his paint different kinds of body and more or less gloss. It may look like this painting has varnish, but there's no varnish on this."

The Sommer is done in his

characteristic middle style, with dark greens and browns and heavily outlined landscape elements. "These colors come from his involvement with the Kit Kat Club in Cleveland. They were very interested in the movements in Europe in the early 20th century," Wat said.

"When we look at this, we see the heavy, firm, consistent black line from German Expressionism and the very tough colors."

This particular work is double-sided. On the verso is an earlier painting, done in the delicate pastels of the Impressionist palette, which, Wat said, "was the kind of thing he was learning in Munich. The darker palette does have a long history with the Munich School, but earlier, in the 1870s."

The Keith painting, *Napa River - Autumn*, will be completely cleaned.

"There's a whole new painting under there," Wat said. "That's the most amazing thing about the removal of a thick layer of yellowed varnish."

There are those who value the darkening of varnish. They liken it to tarnish on silver: you don't want to clean it too much, routing the tarnish out of the decorative engraving and *repousse* work, because that's considered valuable patina, indicative of the silver's antiquity.

But when it comes to painting, varnish is a tricky issue.

"The only time you value the varnish is when it's been applied by the artist," Tunstall said. "Then, it's integral to the look of the work. But a lot of times var-

nishes are put on for aesthetics, to make things look older than they are and to mask problems.

"Natural varnishes are the ones that tend to yellow," he added. "Now, they're replaced with ones that aren't natural and that stay clear."

Wat said the Bierstadt has a varnish drip running down onto its frame. "At some point in its life, someone took a shortcut . . . It's indeed a Bierstadt, albeit a small one, but we've never been able to show it because of its condition."

On the Keith work, the varnish is actually obscuring the image. "Keith was a close friend of George Innes, who would stay with him when he went out to California," Wat said.

"That romantic, tonal landscape for which Innes is so famous is something that other artists were doing as well, and now, with the Keith cleaned, we will have an opportunity to show that."

There's a small Hudson River School painting that's never been shown because someone other than the artist at some point added a few things.

"It has a tremendous amount of in-painting," Wat said. "A pink corner of the sky has obliterated overhanging tree limbs, and much to my secret regret, all of the lily pads are in-painting, added by another hand."

"We examined it under ultraviolet light," Knutas said. "In-painting reflects differently than the original paint. The additions sometimes reflect back darker - dark purple in this case - so we

could tell what was original and what was added on.

"It was probably done in a previous conservation campaign by an untrained conservator. A trained conservator would never do something like this.

"That's one of the dangers when a collector hands over his works to someone who's not trained. It can change the condition of a work, the value of it even," Knutas said.

An urban landscape by Zoltan Sepeshy called *Siesta* (1947) is also on the list; it has some cracking issues that Knutas said will be relatively easy to fix.

Wat summed up the importance of the conservation effort: "As a curator, it's heartbreaking for me to see all these wonderful works down in the vaults and not be able to exhibit them because they have all these issues."